

# STORIES OF PRIVILEGED WOMEN'S LEARNING CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

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## Abstract

The purpose of the study is to examine how White upper-middle class women have learned critical perspectives in unjust power relationships in the United States. To accomplish the purpose, I interviewed two female graduate students and used the method of narrative analysis. Their stories of learning critical perspectives shows that it is important to meet Others and mentors for concreting and crystallizing their critical perspectives, and that privileged people need to experience on-going struggles in order to break self from bias.

## Introduction

Contributing to building social justice has been one of the goals of adult education. Practitioners and scholars in the field of adult education have been interested in making unjust power relationships in society more visible as one of the ways of accomplishing that goal. On one hand, they have made efforts to raise consciousness of learners, including the marginalized and the underprivileged; on the other hand they have analyzed how the privileged form the dominant culture, construct knowledge, and exercise their power to determine what "the truth" is in society. So, their critical stance towards privilege contributes to making privilege visible on individual as well as institutional levels (Brown, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2000).

However, if privileged people are analyzed at the micro level as individuals, the privileged people are not homogenous. Some privileged people are aware that their privileged positions are based on unjust power relationships and they endeavor not to follow the dominant norms of society. They have critical viewpoints about their society and are actively involved in change-oriented social actions, even though they benefit from the power and privilege they possess in a given society. Given this thought, the purpose of this study is to examine how upper-middle class women have learned critical perspectives in unjust power relations in the U.S.

## Literature Review

The studies of the privileged in the U.S. has mainly made efforts to make privilege visible (McIntosh, 2003; Rocco & West, 1998). The main goal of these works is to make privilege visible by showing how privileged people oppress marginalized populations both intentionally and unwittingly. According to Rocco and West (1998) who write theoretically about examining privilege, privilege is defined as, "any unearned asset or benefit received by virtue of being born with a particular characteristic or into a particular class" (p. 173). Rocco and West (1998) suggested a "triarchy" of privilege as a framework to deconstruct privilege, which has psychosocial, reciprocal, and structural realms. In doing so, they show that privilege operates at individual, social relation and structural levels. McIntosh (2003) concretely made more privilege visible. She created a list of forty-six white privileges that affected her own life. Through the list, we can see how white skin exercises power in daily lives of Whites in the U.S. Although the authors mentioned above focus on how privilege, especially privilege for Whites, operates in the U.S., there are few explanations of how the authors themselves, as White people, came to learn critical perspectives, and how Whites can resist racism. In addition, the authors overlook class privilege and sexual orientation privilege but nonetheless, Weber (1998) mentions, "race, class, gender, and sexuality simultaneously operate in every social situation" (p. 24).

Some studies of privileged people provide insights for how privileged people resist privilege norms and the dominant culture. O'Brien (2001) interviewed thirty American White antiracists, between 1996 and 1999 for examining how they became antiracist. Through the study, O'Brien found that "activist networks" with organizations, "empathy" with "approximating experiences," and "planting the seed," were motivators of whites becoming antiracist (pp. 18-37). Among them, O'Brien pays particular attention to the motivator of "planting the seed." In that study, participants commonly recalled their early childhood experiences, and for them, different experiences, that predated their antiracist work, played a role of the "seed" to become activists for antiracism.

### Research Methods

In this qualitative research, two White female graduate students, Amy and Betty (pseudonyms) from upper-middle class families, were interviewed and observed. I met the participants while taking doctoral classes dealing with critical perspectives. I learned about their family background and their perspectives of American society through class discussion. Both participants have privilege in terms of race, class, and sexuality in the U.S. Betty is 30 years old and Amy is 50 years old. The participants are from a northeastern state in the U.S., unmarried White females, and doctoral students. Both participants have a family background of Catholic European-Americans. Both participants describe themselves as upper-middle class. Betty's father is a military officer, and both her parents graduated from university. She had one brother who killed himself when she was in high school. Amy's parents also graduated from university. She is the oldest among her three siblings, who are all male. The participants live apart from their families.

The primary means of data collection were audio-taped (and transcribed), semi-structured interviews that lasted between one, and one and a half hours. Participants also provided written documents in their own writing that addressed some of their expression of critical perspectives. Thus, the multiple sources of data collection methods of interviews and documents were a means of triangulation. For this study, I used the narrative analysis in order to make a story from their interviews. The function of narrative analysis is to consider, "the potential of stories to give meaning to people's lives, and the treatment of data as stories" (Emden, 1998).

### Findings

The following stories show how participants came to have similar perspectives in spite of participants' different ages. I reconstructed participants' stories into a core story, focusing on the process of learning participants' critical perspectives.

#### Conflict in family

Broadly speaking, learning experience of the participants' critical perspectives started from conflict in family, especially their fathers. Their upper-middle class family backgrounds provided the participants with a secure environment in aspect of economy. The patriarchal culture in the family gave rise to conflict in family. The participants complained about their fathers' strict and patriarchal attitude.

Betty's father was an officer in the military. She was brought up in an affluent family. Although moving so many times along with her father's position, she always lived in a similar socio-economic environment. She described her living situation as sheltered. Betty evaluated her father as a very responsible person in regard to his job and family, but that he was also very strict, conservative, and ill tempered. Amy also described her father as very patriarchal. She

said that her father was a chauvinist. She remembered that her father discriminated between her brothers and herself.

The participants have mainly communicated with other family members except their fathers. Betty had one sibling, her older brother. In a strict family environment due to her father, Betty mainly talked with her brother, because her mother tended to side with her father's discipline method. When her brother was in college, Betty had deep conversations with him, including the social and political issue concerning homosexuality. Through those conversations, Betty came to have similar ideas as her brother, including the kind of punk rock music that he liked. She mentioned the experiences with her brother as one of the critical incidents that contributed to forming her critical perspectives. The close relationships with her brother directly and indirectly had influence on her social relationships and her perspectives.

Amy have frequently had conversation with her family and her aunts. Amy said that her mother and aunts who were educated to think critically in a women's college were interested in feminism. She believed that conversations with her mother made her think more critically, whereas her brothers' relationships with her father influenced them to be conservative.

### Encountering "Others"

The participants' journeys in learning critical perspectives originated from the resistance of patriarchal fathers and really started in encountering "Others" who have different background from them. Through meeting with "Others," the participants began to realize that the privileged condition surrounding them was not "shelter," but "limitation."

Amy had a gay male friend as her best friend. She said that she did not know he was gay when they first met. When she found out that he was gay, she said that she was not shocked. Rather, she said, "I, as a friend, did not say anything that time" for his happiness. Although Amy's sexual orientation was heterosexual, she realized and began to understand the discrimination in lives of homosexual people and people of color in the U.S. She often spoke of gay's experiences in describing injustice in the U.S. Amy also had African-American female friends. She noted that she better understood African-American female's thoughts through them. Amy thought that one of the reasons why her brothers were conservative was that, "They never had those African-American friends. They never had a gay friend. They have no idea what diversity represents." The significant "Other" for Betty was her brother. According to Betty, her brother was gay. He was not only a family member, but also an "Other" who introduced her to the ways of thinking politically. Betty's brother also influenced her musical taste. Betty said she really liked punk rock music. She came to like punk rock music because her brother enjoyed listening to it, and some music included contents that criticized society. Under limited circumstance by privilege surrounding her, she encountered indirectly "Others" through the medium of her brother and punk rock music.

### Meeting a Mentor

The participants' critical perspectives were embodied by meeting a mentor. The participants' mentors recognized and labeled participants' thoughts and explained directly to them how power relations operated in the world and how injustice occurred. Amy met a female mentor at her workplace. She remembered her experiences in the workplace as the most unpleasant situation in her life. Her first job was an accountant in a male-dominated field. At that time, Amy met her mentor, who taught her "how all boys' system worked." Like Amy, Betty had a mentor. Betty's mentor was a male coworker who was an activist. After

graduating from college, for a couple of years, Betty said that she lived “a very different life” from her past. At that time, she met a lot of people involved in activist work. One of the activists was Jay, who worked with homeless people, labor poor, and black people. Betty considered meeting Jay as a critical incident for her in learning critical perspectives.

### Academic Work as Activism

The participants, as graduate students, hoped to become professors at the college level. The hope was not merely related to their career, but related to activism. The participants believed they could contribute to social change through academic work. Amy’s motivation of becoming a professor was originated from the issues of gender and class.

What I discovered was that actually elementary school teachers and high school teachers don’t make a lot of money. But college teachers make sufficient money. They make enough money for me to be independent. I can pay my own way.... And also I think the other thing is that elementary and high school is pretty well dominated by women.... When I went into the field of accounting, there were hardly any women in the field. So I was alone woman. And the same thing is in university teaching. There are more men in university teaching than there are women.

Although both Amy and Betty considered professors as a kind of activist, Betty focused more on studying, whereas Amy paid attention to the social position of professors and characteristics of the male-dominated profession. Betty believed that education in the U.S. prohibited students from thinking critically, and that education could change people. She mentioned, “Education is not easy but easy to see how reform can be made.” Based on that belief, she had decided to study education in graduate school and in a Ph.D. program. In addition, Betty said that academic work has helped her learn, “what happen in the world and what should happen in the world” and at the same time, could function as a means of drawing thoughts in her mind.

### Struggle Against Self with Privilege

Although the participants learned critical perspective through their life experiences, they realized that they still had bias and prejudice and struggled to break their prejudice. The participants acknowledged that they did not completely break away from influence of dominant norms in the U.S. yet. Both of them described several examples as evidence that showed their bias.

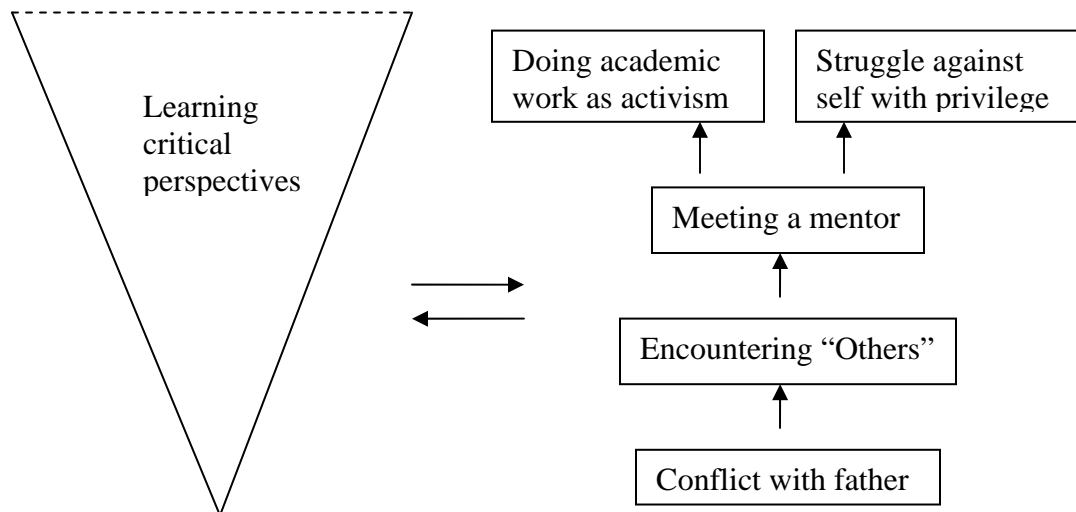
Amy mentioned she felt “guilty” when she did not often smile at a Black person on the street, and when she thought there are people who could feed their family for a month on what she spends on a dress. Accordingly, Amy said that she made efforts to “catch herself” and “break the pattern” in her daily life. Unlike Amy, Betty said that she did not feel guilty, because “it’s been difficult to realize that I did not chose my position and I don’t have to feel guilty because I’m not in control of that.” However, Betty was aware that she still had bias in terms of race.

In sum, the participants in this study struggled against self with privileged. They spoke of their prejudice related to race and class among other privileges. They both agreed it would be almost impossible to get rid of their bias completely. However, the participants stated they have tried to overcome their bias.

### Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to understand how middle-to-upper class White women learn critical perspectives of unjust power relations in the U.S. through their life. The following chart shows the findings of this study.

Figure 1. The participants' learning process of critical perspectives



Although the participants have underprivileged experiences in terms of gender in this study, their experiences do not guarantee their on-going learning of critical perspectives of unjust power relationship in the U.S. It can be more difficult that privileged people disagree with dominant norms and values than underprivileged people do so, because privileged people benefit from unjust power relationships. As Betty said, conditions around privileged people are too “sheltered” to realize marginalized people’s lives. Furthermore, it can be tough for privileged people to realize difficulties of lives of oppressed people because the oppressed people’s experiences are not their part of their lives. Accordingly, in order to accomplish social justice, privileged people should make more efforts than underprivileged people to change. It is necessary for privileged people to connect with “Others” and “mentors” and to endeavor to break their bias that stems from their privilege as well as to change unjust situations in the U.S. Because the participants did not think it was possible that they could completely deconstruct their privilege, they said they would keep endeavoring to deconstruct privilege.

The insights in this study suggest an educational practice for helping privileged people to be involved in social change for social justice. It is important that educators and educational settings that are interested in social justice and in multicultural education, can play a role as “Others” and “mentors” for learners from privileged backgrounds. Educators need to help learners from privileged backgrounds to struggle against their self. In doing this, educators need to remember that various factors, such as class, gender, race, and sexual orientation consist of privilege. In this study, although the participants are underprivileged in aspect of gender, their critical perspectives are not limited to gender issues. Therefore, educators who make efforts to help learners, including privileged people to learn critical perspectives of unjust power relationships, should pay attention to various factors that induce unjust power relationships.

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